

Review of the B.A., B.S. in Public Relations

Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) Code: 09.0902
Public Relations/Image Management

The B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program is housed in the School of Communication within the College of Arts and Sciences. The school also offers a B.A., B.S. in Communication Studies; a B.A., B.S. in Journalism; a B.A., B.S. in Mass Media; minors in communication studies and mass media; and a M.A., M.S. in Communication. The Public Relations program is designed to prepare students to research, plan, execute, and evaluate communication between an organization and its publics, monitor the environment of the organization, and counsel management on policies and programs.

The B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program at Illinois State is the only undergraduate public relations program offered by a public university in Illinois. Enrollment in the program exceeds the combined enrollment of the six undergraduate public relations programs offered by private institutions in the state. Enrollment in the Illinois State program has increased from 233 in fall 2008 to 263 in fall 2014.

The program is the first and only public relations program in Illinois accredited by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). The B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program and the three other undergraduate majors in the School of Communication were collectively recognized in 2014 as the top undergraduate communication program in a 13-state region by the Central States Communication Association.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PROGRAM REVIEW SELF-STUDY REPORT

Self-study process. The approach used by the School of Communication in the previous program review cycle served as a guide for compiling the program review self-study reports for the school during the current program review cycle. The school organized its efforts this cycle so program review self-studies for all programs of the school, including Radio Station WGLT, were compiled collaboratively. Program coordinators began planning the self-study process in late September 2014, starting with a program review orientation meeting facilitated by the Office of the Provost and with discussions among faculty and staff regarding data collection. Faculty and staff involved in the self-studies met multiple times per month beginning in fall 2014 and continuing into spring 2015. By the end of the fall 2014 semester, plans for data collection were complete. The public relations faculty, led by the program coordinator, collected all pertinent documentation and data for the program review, including material from the successful 2013 public relations specialized accreditation self-study. The program coordinator updated that information as needed. During the spring 2015 semester, a digital library of data and documents was established for use by all programs, and drafting of the self-study reports began. Alumni of the school were contacted for their guidance with the studies, and surveys of alumni and graduating seniors were refined and administered.

Program curriculum. The B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program underwent a significant redesign in 2011 that became effective with the 2012-2014 undergraduate catalog. The revision was intended to reduce time to graduation, streamline the program while maintaining appropriate rigor in core areas, and allow students more flexibility to study fields that complement their public relations career goals. In addition, seven of the eight required public relations courses are now delivered online during the summer term, with the eighth class in development for online delivery. These changes have contributed to favorable graduation rates and time-to-degree, with 83 percent of students in the program graduating within four years over the past five years. Students in the program complete coursework in communication theories, media writing and presentation, public relations writing and production, communication research methods, and organizational communication as well as two courses in public relations management (campaigns and corporate communication). Public relations students, like all students in the School of Communication, take advantage of study abroad opportunities in France and South Korea. A new study abroad option, focused on intercultural business communication and public relations study in The Netherlands, is scheduled to begin in 2016. Complementing public relations coursework are numerous co-curricular opportunities. The school sponsors a chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), encourages students to participate in a robust internship/professional practice program, operates its dynamic Chicago Alumni Pipeline for

undergraduates, and sponsors annual Communication Week activities that bring communications professionals to campus, including alumni of the public relations program.

Program or academic unit faculty. Full-time tenured and tenure track faculty members in the B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program have established themselves in the field through their subject matter expertise and scholarly contributions. Faculty members serve as officers in professional associations and have won numerous awards, both in academia and in the field of public relations. Contributions of non-tenure track faculty members are essential to program success because of the additional and varied field experiences they bring to the classroom.

Program goals and quality indices. The two overarching goals of the B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program are to ground the public relations major in specialized knowledge and theories and to emphasize specialized knowledge, skills, and abilities, especially writing, research, critical analysis and decision making, media production, business, and project management. These goals align with both *Educating Illinois* (the strategic plan for the University) and *The Illinois Public Agenda* (the strategic plan for higher education in the state). The program advances these goals by focusing on core public relations principles and practices and by adhering to the research-based standards of the Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR).

Student learning outcomes assessment plan and process. The previous assessment plan for the B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program was approved by program faculty in October 2008, but the plan proved ineffective in assessing student learning and guiding program improvement. To address these shortcomings and to adhere to specialized accreditation standards, faculty redesigned the assessment plan in 2014-2015 and will begin implementing the new plan in 2015-2016. This new plan aligns required courses of the program with the seven learning objectives developed by public relations faculty and sets forth strategies, tools, and processes for assessing student achievement of those learning objectives.

Specialized accreditation. In September 2013 the B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program was accredited by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which awarded the program the Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR). CEPR recognizes public relations programs worldwide that provide the faculty, curriculum, and resources needed to prepare students for professional public relations positions. The next accreditation review by PRSA is scheduled for September 2019. The public relations program at Illinois State is the first and only undergraduate public relations program in Illinois recognized by PRSA.

Responses to recommendations resulting from the previous program review. Faculty and staff of the B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program have addressed Academic Planning Committee recommendations resulting from the 2007-2008 program review. Asked by the committee to identify benchmark programs to determine program characteristics that will lead to national and international esteem, faculty analyzed characteristics of 55 public relations programs in six Midwestern states. Faculty then used findings of the analysis to help guide the 2011 program redesign. In response to the recommendation that the program work closely with the Milner Library specialist to better integrate library resources with the program, public relations faculty have collaborated with library faculty to integrate information fluency instruction in public relations courses and to select resources for the public relations collection maintained by the library. The committee also recommended that faculty seek external funds and develop grantsmanship opportunities. External funding sources specific to public relations are limited, but faculty continues to seek such funding opportunities, recognizing that funding for public relations instruction and research may be more readily available in other fields.

Changes in the academic discipline, field, societal need, and program demand. Of the many changes impacting the public relations field and public relations education, two are preeminent. The public relations industry has dramatically increased its emphasis on quantitative measurement to demonstrate accountability for results. Consequently, companies have been seeking employees with knowledge of contemporary research methods and analytics in order to benchmark campaign metrics. Since 2007 the digital landscape has changed almost entirely with the advent of social media (in its infancy in 2007) and mobile media. Public relations professionals are expected to be knowledgeable about measurement and strategic and tactical use of social media. That knowledge is now considered the most important requisite for new hires. Other trends impacting the education of public relations professionals include the emergence of multigenerational workforces, globalization, and use of virtual teams to conduct business.

Major findings of this program review self-study. Faculty of the B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program concludes that the program equips students with the knowledge and skills they need to succeed in the profession, including writing, management, budgeting, and quantitative analysis. Faculty recognizes the importance of Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) accreditation in differentiating the program at Illinois State from its comparator programs. Of particular concern is the need to hire at least one additional full-time tenure track faculty member to maintain that accreditation. The self-study has revealed several issues related to the curriculum. The program is now just one course shy of offering all required courses online, a characteristic that may convenience more students in the future and help with recruiting efforts. Two new courses may be needed to maintain program rigor and relevance: media relations and research methods. Media relations is at the root of the public relations business and is intensely writing-focused and persuasive. A course in media relations would impart to students knowledge of the principles and practices of this vital aspect of the profession. Research methods are currently taught through a communication research methods course. With increasing emphasis in public relations on quantitative measurement, a research methods course focused on public relations may need to be created. Alternatively, the existing communication research methods course could be redesigned with a public relations focus either throughout the course or in segments of it. Finally, with the success of the program and its recent accreditation, there may be opportunities to expand into graduate study or into certifications in specialized areas of the field.

Initiatives and plans for the next program review cycle. Within the context of the School of Communication strategic plan and assuming sufficient resource availability, the B.A., B.S. in Public Relations program intends to pursue the following initiatives during the next program review cycle: fulfill all recommendations in the Certification in Education for Public Relations (CEPR) accreditation report and maintain accreditation, implement the new assessment plan and make improvements to it as needed, collaborate with other programs in the school to strengthen alumni relations, identify opportunities to augment the program through periodic analysis of aspirational programs and review of industry advances, and seek opportunities for improvement in all programmatic areas to maintain the competitive advantages of the program.

PROGRAM REVIEW OUTCOME AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PLANNING COMMITTEE

The Academic Planning Committee, as a result of this review process, finds the B.A., B.S. in Public Relations to be in Good Standing.

The Academic Planning Committee thanks the program for a well written, critical, and forward-looking self-study report.

The committee congratulates faculty and staff for achieving specialized accreditation for the program for the first time in its history, from the Public Relations Society of America. The program is the first and only public relations program in Illinois to be so accredited and one of only 40 in the world. The committee also congratulates faculty and staff for recognition of Public Relations and the three other undergraduate majors in the School of Communication as, collectively, the top undergraduate program for 2014 by the Central States Communication Association. Contributing to these successes are the many contributions made by program faculty to the discipline through their research. A fall 2013 report by the Communication Institute for Online Scholarship cited the graduate faculty in the School of Communication as among the most productive communication scholars in the nation.

The committee acknowledges efforts of program faculty to maintain a current and relevant curriculum through a 2011 curriculum redesign and through technology enhancements. The revised curriculum provides students greater flexibility in completing a minor or second major related to their career goals while promoting timely graduation by streamlining program requirements and offering almost all required public relations courses online. Since the last program review, public relations faculty members have collaborated with their colleagues in the School of Communication to open the Social Media Analytics Command Center and have integrated center technology with the public relations curriculum. The public relations program maintains a strong emphasis on experiential learning. The program encourages each student to complete at least one internship, and approximately 80 percent of students do so. The program supports numerous co-curricular opportunities including events sponsored by the local chapter

of the Public Relations Student Society of America, which has received the star chapter award five of the last six years.

The committee congratulates the program for its successful recruitment efforts, which have resulted in steady enrollment gains (up 9.6 percent from fall 2010 to fall 2014) and an increase in students self-identifying with racial/ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented at Illinois State (up from 7.5 percent in fall 2007 to 21.3 percent in fall 2014). Once in the program, students persist and graduate at rates higher than university-wide averages. Retention rates for first-time-in-college students and transfer students from fall 2013 to fall 2014 were 92.6 percent and 92.0 percent, respectively, compared to 81.2 percent and 80.3 percent across all undergraduate programs at the University. The six-year graduation rate for first-time-in-college students entering the program in fall 2007 was 85.2 percent versus 71.3 percent university-wide. Of first-time-in-college students graduating from the program in fiscal 2014, 82.3 percent did so within four years compared to 64.3 percent across all undergraduate programs. The committee commends program faculty and staff for their work with students to achieve these successes.

The committee recognizes faculty for development of a new student learning outcomes assessment plan for the redesigned program. The committee asks program faculty to implement the new plan during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 academic years and to document results of its efforts in a follow-up report submitted to the Office of the Provost. The committee asks the school to submit the report by October 1, 2018.

Another means of identifying ways to improve the program is to look to aspirational programs at other universities. According to the self-study report, faculty has identified three such programs but has not yet analyzed them to identify program improvements that might be made to the program at Illinois State. The committee asks faculty to complete the analysis and to report its findings in a follow-up report submitted by the school to the Office of the Provost by October 1, 2016.

Recommendations

The Academic Planning Committee makes the following recommendations to be addressed within the next regularly scheduled review cycle. In the next program review self-study, tentatively due October 1, 2023, the committee asks the program to describe actions taken and results achieved for each recommendation.

- The self-study report indicates that programs of the School of Communication, including the Public Relations program, are scrambling to meet instructional demand resulting from increased enrollment. The report notes that this demand is reflected in student-to-faculty ratios that significantly exceed ratios across all units at the University. The committee recommends that faculty members of the Public Relations program revisit this issue with faculty members of other programs in the school to explore options for addressing this demand and reducing these ratios. Options to explore include, but are not be limited to, establishing priorities for new faculty hires and then requesting additional faculty lines for those programs from the College of Arts and Sciences.
- Of full-time faculty in the school in fall 2014, 40 percent were female. Only 5 percent of tenure track faculty members self-identified with racial/ethnic groups traditionally underrepresented at Illinois State. The committee recommends that the program collaborate with other programs in the school to implement strategies for increasing these numbers, particularly among tenure track faculty.
- With facilities serving students in the school scattered across several campus locations and with the trend toward media convergence, the committee recommends that the program collaborate with other programs in the school and with the Office of Facilities Planning and Construction to study long-term space needs. Among options to consider is collocation of some or all school programs and services to promote synergies among students, faculty, and staff. Recognizing the unlikelihood of obtaining capital development funds from the state in the near- or mid-term, the committee recommends exploring external (i.e., non-state) funding for its facilities improvements.

- The committee encourages faculty to continue exploring opportunities to internationalize the program, through study abroad but also through course content. The committee commends the school for expanding its study abroad options and recommends that the school and program explore establishing a scholarship fund to lower the cost of study abroad for students with limited financial means.
- The self-study report identifies greater emphasis on measurement as a key trend in the discipline and also identifies the need to improve students' research skills. Accordingly, the committee encourages faculty to expand emphasis on research throughout the curriculum. One option to consider is introduction of a public relations research methods course.
- According to the self-study report, participation of public relations students in the Honors program declined from 4.6 percent in fall 2010 to 2.6 percent in fall 2014. The committee encourages the program to develop and implement strategies for reversing this decline.
- Approximately 22 percent of students in the program in fall 2014 were male. Although this percentage falls within the range reported by public relations programs nationally, the committee recommends that the program develop and implement a plan to increase the percentage.
- The program utilizes numerous tools to maintain contact with its alumni. The committee recommends that the program supplement these tools with a system for tracking and documenting career trajectories and accomplishments of its alumni.
- The committee recommends that, throughout the next program review cycle, the program continue to utilize data collected through program assessment to make program changes and to document how that has been done.